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Psychological Capital of University Faculty: Role of Subjective Career Plateau and Work Engagement

ABSTRACT

Most organizational structures determine that 99% of employees will reach career plateau before retirement. There is a critical need to take note of this alarming state in Pakistan Higher Education Sector since the number of academics perceiving they are career plateaued will only escalate in future as more exceptionally competent, qualified and experienced candidates will be competing for a decreasing number of positions ultimately leading to frustration and several negative outcomes. The purpose of this study is to examine how academics' level of psychological capital influences their perception of being career plateaued directly and indirectly through exploring the mediating role of work engagement. The model was tested by conducting Hierarchical Multiple Regression on

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220 valid survey responses collected from academics working in two public sector and two private sector universities situated in Lahore, Pakistan. Analyses showed that relationship between psychological capital and subjective career plateau is partially mediated by work engagement. To reduce perceptions of plateau among teachers, current findings highlight the significance for Higher Education Sector to stimulate work engagement enhancing activities as well as direct their attention towards developing Psychological Capital (PsyCap) of teachers by investing in appropriate interventions and training programs. Based on findings, theoretical and practical implications, limitations and future research possibilities have been discussed.

Key Words: Mediation, Psychological Capital, Subjective Career Plateau, Work Engagement

Introduction

The academic profession is termed as the most significant profession (Perkin, 1969). University teachers are the educationalists and guidance counselors of all other lines of work. Thus, it is universities, through their academicians, that arrange for the growth of newfangled and advanced knowledge, the most important shoots of intellectual culture, and the institutionalization of novelty in the disciplines of technology, sciences and arts. The environment in which teachers in Pakistan and elsewhere in the world function presently demands more of them than it did in any previous period. The working environment has radically transformed that can be attributed to numerous reasons (e.g. high-tech

advancement; necessity of being internationally competitive; modifications in organizational structures) (Barling, 1999). As a result of these changes, individuals encounter several additional challenges, e.g. job insecurity; more work burden; absence of role clarity and low promotional opportunities (Johnson, et al., 2005).

Moreover, teaching has been recognized as nerve-racking profession (Gu & Day, 2007). According to Burke and Greenglass (1996), teachers undergo excessively high stress levels as compared to other professions and the causes provided for it involve extreme workloads, extensive work hours, absence of discipline and lack of respect from learners. Another factor that significantly contributes towards staffs' stress, hinders their performance and negatively affects work-related outcomes is the pyramidal shape of an institute which is undoubtedly the primary source of career plateauing since lesser jobs are vacant with each incremental step up the structural ladder (Tan & Salomone, 1994). Referring to Bardwick (1986) "rule of 99 percent", only 1% of employees will retire before reaching a career plateau. The number of teachers having a perception that they are career plateaued is expected to escalate in future as more exceptionally qualified and experienced candidates will be competing for a decreasing number of positions.

In spite of the natural occurrence of career plateau, this phenomenon produces frustration among individuals and can also lead to decreased motivation levels as well as can harm the engagement and psychological health of staff. The positive psychological resource capacities of teachers can help to reduce their perceptions of being plateaued. The purpose of this article is to develop and test a theoretical model to provide empirical evidence that teachers'

psychological capital can significantly contribute towards reducing their perceptions of being job content and structurally plateaued by enhancing their work engagement.

Literature Review

Psychological Capital (PsyCap) is an individual level outcome that has received significant consideration in recent times. Fundamentally, PsyCap signifies an individual's "positive appraisal of circumstances and probability for success based on motivated effort and perseverance" (Luthans, Avolio, Avey & Norman, 2007, p. 550). It is suggested as a significant composite construct that can contribute towards solving human capital issues. PsyCap has been linked with better employee performance (Peterson, et al., 2011), improved job satisfaction, reduced rates of turnover (Avey, Luthans & Jensen 2009) and reduced stress (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007). Although PsyCap has been explored in a number of studies, there is a lack of studies testing empirically the influence that PsyCap may have on subjective career plateau.

Beginning in 1970s and continuing into 1980s, researchers began to define a novel construct in the literature of Organizational Behavior labelled as 'career plateau' (Bardwick, 1986; Ference, Stoner & Warren, 1977; Veiga, 1981). Initially centering only on vertical promotion, the career plateau description evolved to concentrate on getting additional tasks of greater responsibility. Career plateau is concern of both employees and organizations as this circumstance carries implications for not only personnel regarding how to adjust themselves in organizations but also for organizations in terms of developing strategies to manage staffs (Ismail, 2008). The subjective dimension of

career plateau underlines how an individual perceives, evaluates and responds to the present work situation (Chao, 1990) and their perception of the probability of promotions in future (Burke & Mikkelsen, 2006). Hence, this measurement method will constitute a considerable variance in work-related characteristics and withdrawal behavior (Tremblay & Roger, 2004).

Even though PsyCap is related to a number of attitudinal, behavioral, affective, and health outcomes of employees (Avey, et al., 2011; Rus & Jesus, 2010), the need to expand the collection of these variables through including work engagement is suggested since the comprehension regarding the relation between PsyCap and work engagement is still lacking (Sweetman & Luthans, 2010). Work engagement as a psychological construct in research became popular with the Positive Psychology movement and is seen as developing from positive psychology perspective since it also emphasizes on human fortes and optimum performance instead of malfunctioning and weaknesses (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000).

Work engagement is an active type of wellbeing (Warr, 1990). Personnel who are capable of completing their tasks proficiently, have anticipations of positive results, willpower and pathways to accomplish their job responsibilities, and are competent to bounce back from crisis are ranked as engaged workers (Sweetman and Luthans, 2010). A recent research conducted by Malik (2012) confirms that subjective career plateau has a significant effect on vitality. To stimulate engagement in institutions, personal resources e.g. self-efficacy, hope, resilience and optimism, which fall under the rubric of individual PsyCap (Youssef & Luthans, 2007), could be employed, as these personal resources are suggested to

enhance work engagement (Bakker & Demerouti, 2008). Stress-associated problems related to work and careers negatively affect staff members' sense of wellbeing and work engagement.

Based on the literature discussed in this section, the following research hypotheses are tested in this study.

Research Hypotheses

H₁: A significant negative relationship exists between Psychological Capital and Subjective Career Plateau.

H₂: A significant positive relationship exists between Psychological Capital and work engagement.

H₃: A significant negative relationship exists between work engagement and Subjective Career Plateau.

H₄: Work engagement mediates the relationship between Psychological Capital and Subjective Career Plateau.

Research Method

Research Participants

A non-probability quota sampling, a form of stratified sample was used in this study where selection of cases within strata is completely non-random (Barnett, 1991). Data was collected from four universities of Lahore, Pakistan, out of which two were public sector universities and two were private sector universities. This was the preferred sampling technique since the study was conducted on teachers of two different higher education sectors i.e. the sector was selected as stratification. A total of 220 academics from four universities voluntarily participated in this survey study.

Instruments

The data collection comprised of a biographical data sheet and three scales. A structured and self-administered survey questionnaire was employed to gather data from members of study sample. All items were measured on a five point Likert scale. Demographic information included participants' age, gender, qualification, designation, number of years in current position, sector, university name and department name.

Psychological capital: PsyCap was measured with the 24-item Psychological Capital Questionnaire (PCQ) (Luthans et al., 2007) which consists of four subscales i.e. (1) Self-efficacy, (2) Hope, (3) Resilience and (4) Optimism with each subscale comprising of six items.

Work engagement: The 9-item Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (UWES-9) was used to measure the levels of engagement of the participants (Schaufeli, 2002). This scale is made up of 3 subscales of its dimensions, expressly, vigor, dedication and absorption. Each subscale encompasses three items.

Subjective career plateau: This construct was measured using 12 items Milliman Career Plateau Scale (CPS) (Milliman, 1992). This scale comprises two subscales, namely Job Content Plateauing and Hierarchical plateauing and each subscale consists of six items.

Control variables: Previous researches have displayed that age, gender, qualification, designation and number of years in current position may influence the career plateauing (Slocum, 1985; Stout, Slocum & Cron, 1988; Near, 1985). For that reason, above mentioned demographic variables were

considered as potential control variables while explaining the impact of predictor variable/s on criterion variable.

Data Collection and Response Rate

For the purpose of pre-testing the questionnaire, 25 questionnaires were circulated among teachers in three departments of one public sector university. Results demonstrated adequacy of the instrument. For data collection, a total of 275 questionnaires were distributed in person among the teachers working in different departments of four selected universities. Of the 275 surveys distributed, 246 questionnaires were received, yielding a response rate of 89%. Of those, 26 questionnaires were excluded because of invalid responses. Accordingly, the final valid sample was 220.

Results

Reliability statistics

At first, the reliability of questionnaire items was calculated through Cronbach's Alpha. All three scales had acceptable internal reliability with Cronbach's alpha coefficients .87, .83 and .76 for PCQ, UWES and SCP.

Descriptive statistics and Correlation

Table 1 shows the descriptive statistics and correlation of the three variables. There is a strong positive statistically and practically significant relationship between PsyCap and work engagement, ($r = 0.57, p < 0.01$), a strong negative statistically and practically significant relationship between PsyCap and subjective career plateau, ($r = - 0.49, p < 0.01$) and a moderate negative statistically and practically significant relationship between work engagement and subjective career plateau, ($r = - 0.44, p < 0.01$).

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics and Correlation Matrix of the Constructs

	PC	WE	SCP	Mean	Std. Deviation
PC	1	0.57**	-0.49**	4.1	.40
WE		1	-0.44**	4.2	.45
SCP			1	2.1	.47

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Hierarchical Multiple Regression

Hierarchical multiple regression was conducted to analyze the relationship between PsyCap and subjective career plateau directly and indirectly through work engagement while controlling for the control variables. In step 1 control variables (age, gender, qualification, designation and no. of years in current position) were entered, followed by PsyCap entered in step 2 and work engagement entered in step 3.

Table 2 shows that PsyCap explained significant variation in subjective career plateau ($\Delta R^2=.19$, $\beta= -.56$, $p<.05$). It indicates that a negative relationship exists between PsyCap and subjective career plateau (Hypothesis 1 supported). PsyCap was positively associated with work engagement ($\Delta R^2=.25$, $\beta=.61$, $p<.05$) (Hypothesis 2 supported). Work engagement had a negative association with subjective career plateau ($\Delta R^2=.15$, $\beta=-.43$, $p<.05$) (Hypothesis 3 supported).

According to table 2, work engagement predicts subjective career plateau while controlling for PsyCap ($\beta= -.25$, $p<.05$). Such findings lead to the conclusion that work engagement mediates the relationship between PsyCap and subjective career plateau. Moreover, after controlling for

mediator, the relationship between PsyCap and subjective career plateau still remains significant ($\beta = -.41, p < .05$). Furthermore, the variance accounted by mediated model ($R^2 = .29, p < .05$) was more than the variance accounted by direct model ($R^2 = .26, p < .05$) which proves that work engagement partially mediated the relationship between PsyCap and subjective career plateau (Hypothesis 4 supported). The *Sobel Test* was performed to assess the significance of a mediation effect. After calculating values of $a = .61, s_a = .06, b = -.43$ and $s_b = .06$, these values were inserted into Sobel calculator. Result of Sobel test ($z = 5.85, p < .05$) put forward that the indirect effect of the PsyCap on the subjective career plateau through the mediator variable i-e work engagement is significant. Thus work engagement significantly carries the influence of PsyCap to subjective career plateau indicating that teachers' level of PsyCap has an impact on subjective career plateau through work engagement.

Table 2: Hierarchical Multiple Regressions

Model	Dependent Variable	Independent Variable (s)	R^2	ΔR^2	β
1	SCP	(i) CVs	.06*	.06*	-.56*
		(ii) CVs + PC	.26*	.19*	
2	WE	(i) CVs	.08*	.08*	.61*
		(ii) CVs + PC	.33*	.25*	
3	SCP	(i) CVs	.06*	.06*	-.43*
		(ii) CVs + WE	.22*	.15*	
4	SCP	(i) CVs	.06*	.06*	-.56*
		(ii) CVs + PC	.26*	.19*	
		(iii) CVs + PC	.29*	.038*	

+WE

-.25*

*: Significant at 0.05 level of significance

CV= Control Variables; PC = Psychological Capital;

SCP = Subjective Career Plateau; WE = Work Engagement;

R² = Proportion of variance accounted for; ΔR^2 = R square Change;

β = Unstandardized regression coefficient

Control Variables: age, gender, qualification, designation and no. of years in current position

Discussion

The purpose of present study was to empirically examine the influence of PsyCap on subjective career plateau directly and indirectly through exploring the mediating role of work engagement. PsyCap is found to be negatively related to subjective career plateau of teachers. Results also provide empirical support for the partially mediated model. Precisely, PsyCap enhances teachers' work engagement that in turn reduces subjective career plateau. The study finding that higher levels of PsyCap are associated with higher levels of work engagement is supported by various research studies conducted internationally (Viseu, Rus & de Jesus, 2015). A significant negative relationship between work engagement and subjective career plateau was found which is also maintained by McCleese (2006) who elucidated a negative relationship between job content plateauing and work attitudes. The combined relationship between these three constructs has not been explored yet therefore this study yielded an important new finding in the understanding of the relationships between PsyCap, work engagement and subjective career plateau in this specific study population.

Research Limitations

The cross-sectional survey method restricts to infer causality amongst variables. The use of self-reported questionnaires for collecting data is another limitation since it is criticized for several reasons. Firstly, common method variance, also called mono-method bias, is problematic. Secondly, self-report data is susceptible to response biases due to which the reliability and validity of data is affected. Consistency and social desirable responding are the possible response biases that effect study findings employing self-report scales. This study is limited in scope of sample size as well as time span and to Pakistan. The current findings are significant for Pakistan Higher Education Sector as these are embedded in a national system directed by economic, political, technological and legal factors that may change from country to country. Thus, this does not allow generalizing the results to a significantly different cultural context.

Theoretical and Practical Implications

The research findings have theoretical as well as practical implications. Theoretical implications are in terms of providing empirical evidence that PsyCap is negatively correlated with subjective career plateau and that work engagement is a significant mediator of this relationship. This evidence is significant as it will enable policy makers, higher education authorities and university administrations to plan initiatives and trainings.

An understanding of the factors that impact teachers' subjective career plateau is provided by the results of present study, which yields suggestions regarding ways in which to reduce perception of being plateaued in teachers. As both PsyCap and work engagement negatively correlate

and significantly contribute towards decreasing the subjective career plateau, thus with reference to practical implications, the current findings highlight the significance for higher education sector to stimulate work engagement enhancing activities as well as direct their attention towards developing PsyCap of teachers as personal resource. A study by Luthans et al. (2006) found that human resource interventions aimed at developing the state-like construct of PsyCap can be facilitated by means of training sessions.

Lastly, in addition to efforts from Higher Education Commission (HEC) and university administrations to improve higher education institutions and their career management practices, it is equally important to motivate teachers to make efforts themselves when they want to increase their career opportunities. If they remain optimistic, resilient and high in hope and self-efficacy, and engaged in their work even after a period of long stability, they are expected to be more contented and less stressed in their work.

Conclusion and Future Research

Present study is the first to develop and test theoretical model that empirically examines impact of PsyCap on subjective career plateau, mediated by work engagement. Therefore, it provides preliminary evidence that PsyCap can influence perceptions of career plateau directly and indirectly through work engagement and that public and private sector university teachers differ significantly in terms of their PsyCap, work engagement and subjective career plateau levels. Consequently, present study findings provide higher education administration awareness and new insight into determining strategies to help reduce perceptions of plateau

and overcome this problem by investing in trainings and interventions directed towards developing PsyCap and work engagement which will also help them in becoming more creative and productive personnel.

Current novel findings can be extended by means of minimizing the aforementioned limitations of time span and sample or by bringing new dynamics in present model. The future research should also investigate the antecedents to PsyCap. As there is no systematic method of inspecting this, it may be considered as productive area regarding future research. Moreover, the association between PsyCap and stress, absenteeism, psychological well-being and transformational leadership has not been explored fully so future research should be dedicated to investigate these relationships in different samples and across cultures. Having limited resources and time, institutions possibly will be unable to invest in developing all four dimensions of PsyCap at the same time. Therefore, ascertaining which of the four dimensions has the optimum impact on teachers' work engagement may assist university administrations to capitalize on that dimension to obtain greatest returns with regard to work Engagement.

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